



BetterSafe

WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR FAMILY'S SAFETY

GETTING SAFE & RELIABLE HEALTH INFO



People love exchanging health information. More than half of adults nationwide say they turn to friends or family for health information or support when facing a serious health issue. People also share health information within their communities—at school, work, places of worship, and various events.

The quality of the health information you get depends on the source. “When looking online for health information, it’s a good idea to start with reputable websites, such as government websites,” says National Institutes of Health’s (NIH) Stephanie Dailey, who specializes in sharing health information with older adults. “Government agencies have well-researched information that’s been vetted by expert scientists and doctors.”

“Students and others can be drawn to websites with quirky or ‘amazing’ health stories that may be inaccurate,” says Timothy Keady, who heads the student wellness center at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. “We always try to steer them back toward more appropriate health information that’s based on science. We know that information from NIH, the CDC, and other agencies is going to be accurate.”

No matter where you gather and read health information, it’s a good idea to discuss what you’ve found with your health care provider. Your provider can help you understand and interpret what you’ve found.

“Being well informed about a condition can be helpful when you visit your doctor,” Dailey says. “You may wish to print out some of the information you find to share with your doctor during your appointment.”

Spotting Spotty Websites and Claims

How can you tell if websites are hawking a hot new product, old-fashioned snake oil, or something in between? These signs can help you determine whether a website or an ad is on the up-and-up.

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- No one treatment works for everybody. All conditions are different. Two people with the same diagnosis may need different treatments. Be skeptical of any website with ads for products that claim to treat any condition.
- “Natural” doesn’t necessarily mean safe or effective.
- Bogus marketers often use trickery and vague language to take advantage of people. Testimonials on websites with ads for products that claim to cure or treat conditions can seem honest and heart-felt, but they can be completely false. In fact, they may not disclose that actors or models have been paid to endorse the product. Even when testimonials come from people who have taken the product, personal stories are not reliable as evidence of effectiveness
- Lots of technical jargon may sound impressive, but by itself, doesn’t prove effectiveness. Big words from a medical dictionary are no substitute for plain-language facts from your doctor.

- A money-back guarantee doesn’t prove that a product works. Even if the money-back guarantee is legitimate, it isn’t a reliable substitute for scientific evidence that a treatment is safe or effective.

Use this checklist to decide if the health information you’re reading online can be trusted:

- ✓ **Who runs the website?** Federal agencies, medical schools, and large professional or nonprofit organizations are often reliable sources of health information.
- ✓ **Who is sponsoring the website?** Be wary if it’s not easy to find the sponsor’s contact information or if the website is trying to sell you something.
- ✓ **Is the information current?** Sites should say when the information was posted or last reviewed.
- ✓ **Is your privacy protected?** Be sure you understand the website’s privacy policy. Be cautious about sharing personal information.

